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Controversy Surrounds Construction of WalMex Store Near Historic Pyramids

by LADB Staff

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WalMex, a subsidiary of giant US retailer Wal-Mart, has gained final government approval to proceed with construction of a controversial Bodega Aurrera in the shadows of the historic Teotihuacan pyramids. The store, which will span more than 6,500 sq meters, will be located only 2.6 km from a national park that houses a complex of pyramids and other structures erected as early as 400 A.D.

Anthropologists are not certain what civilization constructed the pyramids, which were abandoned about 600 A.D. The Aztecs later came upon the site and named it Teotihuacan (the place where humans become gods). The construction of the superstore so close to the national anthropological treasure has created a furor.

Homero Aridjis, founder of the environmental and civic organization Grupo de los 100, said construction of the store so close to the pyramids was equivalent to "driving the stake of globalization into the heart of Mexican antiquity." Similar sentiments appeared in the Mexican media. "What does this mean? Perhaps they can build a strip club at the Holy Sepulcher [the site where Jesus was buried], a McDonald's at the ruins of Monte Alban [another famous Mexican ruin], or a Hard Rock Cafe next to the pyramids of Egypt," said Javier Aranda Luna.

Aranda, who is also a radio commentator, writes a column in the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada*. Indigenous groups used the annual *Dia de la Raza* celebration, known in the US as Columbus Day, on Oct. 12 to protest the construction of the Bodega Aurrera store, which is scheduled to open in December.

The indigenous groups asked Wal-Mart to immediately halt construction of the store. Critics worry construction may damage archeological treasures. The protesters charged Wal-Mart with trampling on their Indian heritage and suggested that the construction equipment may have been destroying irreplaceable relics. "The ruins and us go together," local resident Irma Gonzalez Rodriguez told *The New York Times*. "We are part of this culture. They will leave us without work, without anything."

The Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (INAH), however, dismisses the concerns that the construction may be destroying archeological treasures. Officials said most artifacts were recovered a long time ago in the area where the new store is being erected. "I don't feel there is a risk," said one official, who noted that archaeologists are at the construction site daily.

The critics accuse the INAH of misleading local residents because pottery shards, arrows, and other relics have been uncovered in the earth excavated from the construction site. Nevertheless, the

project has received an endorsement from the Mexico chapter of the Paris-based International Council On Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), an oversight body which helps monitor UN World Heritage Sites like Teotihuacan. "The project in question does not damage the conservation of archaeological remains nor the integrity, environmental, or cultural values of the archaeological zone," said ICOMOS in a report published in early October. The report also dismissed concerns that the store would ruin the view from the top of the pyramids, nearly a mile away.

Still, ICOMOS recommended a number of aesthetic measures for the new store, including the use of nonreflective roofing materials, perimeter walls, and trees. In addition to the archeological concerns, critics have raised arguments presented whenever a Wal-Mart store is constructed in a small community. These include the charge that the huge operation will drive local family enterprises out of business and damage the lifestyle of the community. "They say they will bring 200 jobs," said a local resident. "How many people are you going to leave without jobs for those 200?"

Protests fail to halt construction

The protests against the Bodega Aurrera have not been as intense as those in Cuernavaca in 2002, when US wholesaler Costco proposed constructing a store at the site of the historically significant Casino de la Selva (see SourceMex, 2002-09-25). While protesters were not able to halt the construction of Costco in Cuernavaca, protesters in Oaxaca city succeeded in convincing authorities to deny a permit for McDonald's to construct a store adjacent to the city's historic plaza.

As was the case with Costco in Cuernavaca, opponents of the Bodega Aurrera in Teotihuacan are facing difficult odds in their efforts to stop the project, which is already well underway. This is because WalMex, short for Wal-Mart de Mexico SA, has already obtained the necessary state and federal permits to proceed with the construction. Still, some critics are questioning how the company obtained permission from INAH to construct a store on land supposedly protected under Mexican law as an archaeological site. "We see awful corruption all around that stinks, from INAH to the mayor's office," said local resident Emmanuel D'Herrera.

INAH officials defend their actions, saying they explored every available option to stop the project. "We have legal limitations, and those limitations are very clear," INAH director Sergio Raul Arroyo told reporters. The protesters did convince the administration of Mexico state Gov. Arturo Montiel to look into the possibility of moving the Bodega Aurrera to a different site. The Mexico state government, however, failed to convince WalMex to relocate the store, partly because construction was already advanced.

Manuel Cadena Morales, Mexico state's director of interior affairs, said the Montiel administration was powerless to halt construction of the new store. "We would have been in violation of the law because the investors had already complied with all the requirements needed for the project," said Cadena. Company officials said the decision to construct the store was based on the needs of the community. WalMex spokesman Raul Arguelles said residents of the town of Teotihuacan had the choice of paying high prices locally or traveling to WalMex stores in other towns. "The community wants the store," said Arguelles.

WalMex's success in fending off opposition to its store in Teotihuacan reflects the company's growing influence in Mexico's retail industry. The company, now the country's largest private employer, operates 650 units as part of its six chains of supermarkets, department stores, and restaurants.

The construction of the Teotihuacan store is part of the company's efforts in recent years to expand to smaller communities. The company, which entered Mexico in 1991 through a takeover of the Cifra retailer, credits the opening of 15 stores in smaller communities for its five consecutive quarters of growth. In February, WalMex announced plans to open 77 new stores this year and next. WalMex estimates annual revenues at more than US\$11 billion a year, which is larger than the other top three discount retailers in Mexico combined. (Sources: The New York Times, United Press International, 09/28/04; Reuters, 09/11/04, 10/06/04; Associated Press, 10/06/04; La Jornada, 08/04/04, 09/30/04, 10/06/04, 10/07/04; Dow Jones Newswires, 09/09/04, 10/07/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 08/02/04, 08/11/04, 10/08/04, 10/13/04)

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